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ABSTRACT

An investigation was conducted to describe the context of distance learning by examining the factors to which first-year distance learners attribute their success and failure and the influences on those attributions. It tested the attribution theory of achievement motivation in a distance learning setting. The method was a qualitative case study: data were obtained through observations, interviews, and questionnaires conducted with a small sample (about 100 in parts of the research process) of first-year distance learners at Anadolu University's Open Education Faculty in Eskisehir, Turkey. These learners had to make a hasty transition from the traditional teacher-centered form of their high school education to one in which they must function independently as they learn from textbooks and, optionally, from instructional television programs and a limited offering of face-to-face lectures. Results indicate that the students attribute both their success and their failure primarily to effort and ability and secondarily to luck. Personal, cultural, and educational factors combine to influence their attributions for success and failure. Salient among these factors is the Turkish oral cultural tradition, which affects distance learners' attributions most strongly and often leads to changes in behavior. (45 references) (Author/KC)

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A STUDY OF MOTIVATION IN TURKISH DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this investigation is to describe the context of distance learning by examining the factors to which first-year distance learners attribute their success and failure and the influences on those attributions. It tests the attribution theory of achievement motivation in a distance learning setting. The method is qualitative case study: data were obtained through observations, interviews, and questionnaires with a small sample of first-year distance learners living in Eskişehir, Turkey. Results indicate that the students attribute both their success and failure primarily to effort and ability and secondarily to luck. Personal, cultural, and educational factors combine to influence their attributions for success and failure. Salient among these is the Turkish oral cultural tradition, which affects distance learners' attributions most strongly and often leads to changes in behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Developing countries such as China, Costa Rica, and Turkey have recently followed the example of the well-known model of the British Open University to provide distance education at the university level at a low cost through existing or available technologies (Jianshu, 1988; Rumble, 1981; McIsaac & Murphy, 1988). Distance learners in developing countries in particular are products of somewhat authoritarian face-to-face educational programs; thus distance learners who are still in transition from such traditional high school programs to systems emphasizing independent learning often have special needs because they are unprepared to learn independently.

Distance learners, who are separated in time and place from their instructors, do not have access to the familiar forms of motivation that instructors normally provide, or even the social contacts that are associated with face-to-face learning. As a result, those who are learning at a distance must be internally motivated, or the system must motivate them externally. For distance learners, motivation appears to be linked to their perceptions of the causes of success and failure (Taylor, Morgan, & Gibbs, 1981; Gibbs, Morgan, & Taylor, 1984) and is also connected with participation and dropout rates (deFreitas & Lynch, 1987; Scales, 1984; Woodley & Parlett, 1983), with

completion rates (Brindley, 1987; Peruniak, 1984), and with achievement (Dodds, Lawrence, & Guiton, 1984; Rekkedal, 1983).

This paper explores the motivation of first-year distance learners at Anadolu University's Open Education Faculty (OEF) in Eskişehir, Turkey. These distance learners must make a hasty transition from the traditional teacher-centered form of education to one in which they must function independently as they learn from text books and, optionally, from instructional television programs and a limited offering of face-to-face lectures. This transition occurs in a predominantly Islamic culture rooted in an oral tradition, where students are accustomed to a system in which they derive knowledge from a hoca (Teacher, or One Who Transmits Knowledge); the hoca concept still prevails in modern Turkey, where teachers and professors are held in high esteem and make all educational decisions about what is to be learned and how it will be accomplished (Kazamias, 1965; Weiker, 1981). As OEF students learn primarily from text books in the isolated environment of their homes, without the opportunity to ask questions of a knowledgeable person, the question should be asked about what factors they perceive as responsible for their success and failure.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1979, 1986) provides a conceptual framework for understanding achievement motivation. Attribution theory is concerned with an individual's explanations

of why certain events have occurred, and with consequential effects on emotions and achievement behavior. Events that people perceive as negative, unexpected, or significant (such as examination results) are more likely than others to provoke individuals to explain the event. According to Weiner (1986), people are likely to attribute their success and failure to such causes as effort, ability, luck, the ease or difficulty of the task, and the learning conditions. These explanations, or attributions, are influenced by situational determinants (such as individuals' background, their orientation to study, and certain socio-cultural factors), and they have psychological and emotional reactions that are associated with how they expect to succeed or fail at similar tasks. Frequently these attributions lead to a behavior change related to the event.

Turkish distance learners who are beginning their studies are likely to encounter particularly problematic situations because they are unfamiliar with their new print-based learning system, which seems to oppose the prevalent oral tradition. With such a potentially problematic situation facing new OEF students, this study sought to address the following questions: 1) To what factors do first-year OEF students attribute their success and failure? 2) What are the influences on those attributions?

This study represents a new application of attribution theory in a distance learning setting in Turkey. First, the theory had not previously been tested in a distance learning environment, though it has been applied in higher education

settings (Covington & Omelich, 1985; Simon & Feather, 1983). Second, cross-cultural applications of attribution theory are limited and in most cases have attempted only to explain differences in achievement (e.g., Okuda, 1986; Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1986; Triandis, 1972; Melikian, Ginsberg, Cüceloğlu, & Lynn, 1971; Weiner & Kukla, 1970). Third, this study exemplifies a current trend in educational research methodology toward the use of qualitative methods to obtain the student perspective of achievement motivation.

METHOD

The motivation of distance learners has been addressed frequently from an institutional perspective through large scale surveys. More recently, studies have used qualitative research methods to obtain the student perspective (e.g., Parer, 1988; Kelly & Shapcott, 1987; Gibbs, Morgan, & Taylor, 1984; Marland, Patching, Putt, & Store, 1984). Qualitative methods allow researchers access to information not readily available through other methods, and they provide baseline research in situations where little or no research has been conducted.

Case Study Methodology: This research used a case study methodology. In the spirit of Yin (1984), the purpose was to generalize about distance learners' motivation to a theoretical framework. The case study approach to research on motivation in distance education represents an attempt to gather in-depth data about an individual's orientation to study, beliefs about success

and failure, and approaches to study, for the purpose of contributing to a broader conceptualization of the motivation of distance learners.

Subjects: The subjects for this study were drawn from the population of first-year OEF students living in the city of Eskişehir during the 1987-88 academic year. Fifteen first-year students living in Eskişehir were involved in a series of observations and interviews during a ten month period; four of these students were later selected for in-depth case study. These students were selected on the basis of personal referrals and responses to a questionnaire. In addition, six first-year students living in the Eskişehir region were randomly selected for structured interviews immediately following their midterm examinations.

Sixty-seven first-year students living in Eskişehir completed an initial questionnaire as they registered with the OEF, and 61 of those who agreed to participate further in the research were sent a second questionnaire five months later, shortly after their midterm examinations.[1]

Interviews were also conducted with 35 other individuals associated with the OEF; these individuals were chosen on the basis of information that they possessed or the services that they provided for this study. They included: OEF

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[1] I have included translations of direct quotations from interviews and questionnaires of students from each sample, not just from the four students who were selected as case studies.

administrators, professors, and course designers, students at other levels or locations, instructors, television directors, Ministry of Education and Higher Education Council officials, and professors at other universities.

Sources of data: Yin (1984) suggests that multiple sources of data be used in case study research to "triangulate," or corroborate evidence. Data for this study included the following sources: 1) structured and unstructured interviews with first-year students and with others associated with the OEF; 2) participant-observations of students and their lecturers; 3) questionnaires given to first-year students; 4) documentation including schedules of television and radio broadcasts and of face-to-face lectures, results of previously administered surveys, and newspaper articles; 5) archival records including grade point averages and demographic data about first-year students; and 6) physical artifacts including instructional television programs, text books, and the student handbook.

Instruments: The instruments consisted of two questionnaires and three interview protocols. Questionnaire 1 elicited demographic information, reasons for participation in the OEF, and information about whether or not the student would be willing to participate further in the study. Questionnaire 2 was an attitude survey consisting of both multiple choice and open-ended questions about each component of the OEF (books, television, face-to-face lessons, and examinations) and attributions for success and failure. Three interview protocols

assessed students' 1) purposes in pursuing a university degree with the OEF, 2) attributions for success and failure, and 3) retroactive analysis of events and their associated emotions and behaviors.

Analysis: Data analysis in qualitative research begins as the researcher initiates the study and continues during data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Verbal and written responses from the interviews and questionnaires were first translated into English, transcribed, and entered into the computer. The first stage of analysis involved coding of these data. The coding categories were suggested by the framework of attribution theory (Weiner, 1979, 1986) and initially included: significant events, feelings associated with the events, situational determinants, attributions for success and failure, and specific behaviors. The codes were refined as the researcher discovered more types of data. Following the coding, the next step involved writing four individual case studies and drawing up individual summary tables.

With the aid of an indexing file on a word processor, the next level of analysis involved cross-case analysis on the basis of patterns and themes common to all four cases. These patterns and themes included: the personal, cultural, and educational factors which influenced students' attributions, feelings associated with these attributions, and resulting behavior changes which related to their studies. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984), a final level of analysis involved the display of qualitative data in the form of tables and charts,

including demographic data of the four case studies and the reasons that the students gave for participating in the system.

RESULTS

The OEF has been operating since 1982 and serves over 170,000 students throughout Turkey. The operations of the OEF are administered by the Central Administrative Bureau in Eskisehir and 20 service bureaus throughout Turkey. Instruction in Business Administration and Economics is provided primarily through text books sent to the students by mail; this printed instruction is supplemented by broadcast television and radio programs, a handful of Video Education Centers, and face-to-face lectures held at 19 universities in 24 cities of Turkey and Northern Cyprus (see the map in Figure 1). Achievement is assessed on the basis of two regular examinations given each year--a midterm, and a final, which first-year students may retake once if they fail any subjects.

First-year OEF students are generally older than their counterparts in traditional universities--the average age of first-year OEF students increased to the 21 - 30 age bracket in 1987-88. Approximately 70% of the students are male, and by 1985-86, the number of all first-year students who were employed had increased to 61%. In Turkey, a general population movement to the cities is reflected in the demographics of new OEF students: in 1985-86, 84% of the new students lived in urban areas, while only 16% lived in towns and villages. Finally,

about 2/3 of first-year students are in the Business Administration track, while 1/3 are pursuing degrees in Economics (Tekin & Demiray, 1989; McIsaac, Murphy, & Demiray, 1988; Özgü, 1988; Öz-Alp, 1987).

Personal Context: First-year OEF students indicate that they are motivated to participate in the program primarily for "vocational" reasons as the system allows them to continue working while pursuing a degree in either Business Administration or Economics. The following comment by a first-year student describes a typical vocational orientation.

> I am working and cannot attend a university where attendance is compulsory, so I both work and study here at the Open Education Faculty. (Interview 1 with a first-year student)

Figure 2 illustrates the responses of a sample of 60 students to Questionnaire 1, in which they ranked their reasons for participating in the OEF system. The possibility of combining work and study was ranked first by nearly 70% of these students.

Figure 2 about here

Cultural Context: Culture plays an important role in the educational views that students hold. Turkish students are products of a culture which places a high value on education while emphasizing social interactions. These cultural factors affect the OEF students' perceptions of their learning

environment. The concept of kalem efendisi (Master of Writing) is still relevant today as people feel pressured to complete a university degree in order to attain higher status. Distance learners are no different; standard reasons that they give for pursuing a university degree are to increase their status in society or their work opportunities, as the following comment by a first-year student indicates:

> Everything depends on a higher education diploma. We study as hard as we can to get that diploma. (Interview with a first-year student)

Compounded by what some have recently termed as difficult economic conditions in Turkey (Price Indices, 1988; OECD Employment Outlook, 1987), individuals must consider how they can pursue a degree without becoming a financial burden to their families.

> The biggest advantage of the OEF is that it gives us the opportunity of working while studying. Also, it doesn't pose great financial difficulties. I am where I want to be--with my parents. (Interview with a first-year student)

A third cultural factor that influences how students characterize success is the strong emphasis in Turkey on social interactions, or their need for affiliation. The face-to-face lectures may be especially important to students who are trying to identify with an academic institution and avoid feelings of isolation. Some students, like the following, attend the face-to-face lessons primarily to be with their friends.

> I attend the lessons with my friends. I depend on them. I can't leave them. If they don't go, I don't want to go either. My mind is with them

> . . . I can't pay attention to the lessons without my friends. That doesn't happen all the time, but almost always. (Interview with a first-year student)

Student Evaluations of their Educational Context: The ways that students view their educational background and their new distance learning environment also influence their perceptions of success. Students who graduated from vocational-technical high schools voice frustration with their limited preparation in certain areas. As a result, they may fail subjects, or they may take private classes to compensate for their deficiencies.

> I understand the subject when I'm at the lectures, but I don't understand it at all when I'm by myself. I think I'm going to take the make-up examinations in mathematics in September; then I'll have the entire summer to prepare for it. I'll get someone to work with me. (Interview with a first-year student)

> Even though we study the books and attend the face-to-face tutorials regularly, we don't understand anything. The technical school didn't provide us with the necessary background. We have to take an extra course just to understand the subject. (Interview with the first-year student who earned the highest grade point average of those in the sample of 61)

Attributions for Success and Failure: The meaning of success and failure may be different for face-to-face students than for distance learners. For example, Turkish students typically comment that when they were in high school, they attributed high marks to their efforts (<u>aldim</u> means "I got it" or "I earned it"), whereas they attributed low marks to their teachers (<u>verdi</u> means "he/she gave it to me"). Because the OEF examinations are computer-scored, however, distance learners

cannot attribute low marks to their teachers as they do in face-to-face settings.

The first major event that first-year students face is the midterm examination. For months they focus their attention on this significant round of examinations. After taking their midterm examinations and before receiving those results, students were given Questionnaire 2. In this questionnaire, they were asked about the factors to which they would attribute their success (a higher mark than they expected) and failure (a lower mark than they expected) on any of their midterm examinations. Figure 3 illustrates the responses from 35 students, who attributed their expected success and failure primarily to individual effort and ability, and secondarily to luck. They also perceived the relative difficulty of the examination as a contributing factor to both their success and failure. They viewed their study conditions as an important factor only in their expected failure.

Figure 3 about here

Students' responses to open-ended questions in the same questionnaire are further indication that they attributed success and failure on their midterm examinations primarily to individual effort and ability.

> My success is due to my own efforts. I attend the face-to-face lessons regularly and watch the TV programs. (Response of a first-year student to Questionnaire 2)
>
> I can't blame my environment and home for my failure. I just didn't study well. (Response of a first-year student to Questionnaire 2)

Others, however, viewed their study conditions as major factors in their expected failure.

> I am not successful in general. I have no time to study, and I can't find a place to sit when I go to the face-to-face lessons. The TV programs are broadcast very early, and generally no one from my family or friends can help me. (Response of a first-year student to Questionnaire 2)

DISCUSSION

A number of scholars (e.g., Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984; Miller & Parlett, 1974; Perry, 1970; Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 1968) have demonstrated the need to examine the existence of individual differences among university students, as well as the complex context in which learning takes place. The situational determinants which were found to influence OEF students' perceptions of success and failure include their personal, cultural, and educational contexts. The extent to which the students are able to assimilate or accommodate factors of their new learning environment into these contexts relates to their perceptions of success and failure; these perceptions in turn may influence the students' behavior and study strategies connected with their learning process.

A student's conceptualization of success and failure is characterized by a combination of features. Salomon (1979, 1983, 1984) identifies the "reciprocal interaction" between media, the learner's cognitive make-up, and the utilization of specific mental skills to explain how people learn. Salomon's work indicates that the amount of mental effort that individuals invest in learning from various media influences the amount and kind of learning that results. Given the nature of the OEF examination system with its emphasis on memorization, and the students' arduous working conditions that permit them only limited time to study, it is likely that OEF students interact with text in a surface manner, which results primarily in their memorizing facts. Distance learners like the following, whose work schedules dominate their lives, can put only limited effort into their studies and process their reading at a surface level.

> . . . We usually finish our daily accounts and other duties at 8:00 or 9:00 pm. Now what I'm most anxious about is how I will study my lessons. Because I have to deal with such heavy duties all day long, I get very tired. It will be very difficult to sit down and study when I am so weary. I think I'll study only during the weekends. . . (Interview 1 with a first-year student)

An individual's orientation to learning and the method of interaction with instructional materials and sequences determines the type of learning in which an individual engages (Jonassen, 1982) and the amount and kind of effort that they make in their studies (Gibbs, Morgan, & Taylor, 1984). OEF students with a primary vocational orientation, for example, recognize that their

working conditions restrict them from placing much effort into their studies.

> It's less difficult for students in traditional universities than it is for us, because here we are required to study by ourselves, and we also work at very tiring jobs. These things prevent us from studying adequately. (Interview with a first-year student)

They work as much as ten hours per day and are often unable to attend face-to-face lectures. Figure 4 illustrates how the 35 students who responded to Questionnaire 2 reported their attendance at the lectures. Thirty-six percent reported that they never attended any of the lectures, while nearly 64% reported attending at least some of them.

Figure 4 about here

Figure 5 illustrates that nearly half of the students reported that they never watched any OEF television programs, just over half watched the programs at least some of the time, and no students reported watching the programs all the time.

Figure 5 about here

Many of the students explained that they found the early morning television broadcast time inconvenient. Because of their working

conditions, many students use none of the supplemental services of the OEF.

Cultural and religious beliefs influence Turkish distance learners in two related ways. Not only must these students get used to studying once again, having been away from education for varying periods of time, but they must also learn how to study independently instead of studying in the familiar teacher-oriented educational system. Perhaps even more significant is that cultures rooted in an oral tradition are likely to express themselves in terms of practical situations rather than in abstract terms (Ong, 1982). Accompanying this is an Islamic tradition emphasizing rote learning and memorization--an emphasis that precludes much interaction with the text. Distance learners, however, are required to demonstrate their achievement, based on this interaction with text, without the familiar social structure of traditional education.

A further obstacle to learning is the educational background of OEF students. Many of them graduated from an educational system which they feel did not prepare them sufficiently for their university studies. Vocational and technical high schools provide training in technical areas, whereas conventional and private high schools prepare students for study at a university. Although the majority of all high school students attend conventional high schools (Statistical Yearbook of Turkey, 1987), the majority of first-year OEF students are graduates of vocational and technical high schools. Graduates of the

vocational high schools say that they received limited preparation in subjects like mathematics and social sciences.

In spite of these obstacles, OEF students make a remarkable transition from face-to-face education to distance learning during their first year. The experience of the midterm examinations is sufficient for many of these students to cope with their final examinations, as the following remarks indicate.

> Getting through the midterm examinations helped me understand what is expected of me. Now I feel comfortable about preparing for the final examinations. I believe I will get even higher marks in June. (Interview with a first-year student)

For other students, however, the transition entails learning how to juggle studies with a heavy work schedule and family commitments. Such students, like the following second-year student, learn to establish more realistic goals.

> Eighty percent of the OEF students have jobs. If they have families, they also have to watch the children and do housework and go shopping. When they have any free time, they study. They pass their classes only by working diligently. (Interview with a second-year student)

CONCLUSIONS

Ong (1982) notes that people from cultures with an oral tradition have an oral "mentality," which does not change when the society becomes literate. He points out that "oral folk assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived text book quizzes but as situated in operational contexts" (p. 55). Turkish distance learners suddenly find themselves in a literate

system in which the focus in large part is on learning from text books and expression in an abstract "multiple choice" examination system. The Turkish oral cultural tradition thus appears to be the salient factor in the interaction of the personal, cultural, and educational contexts.

The conditions under which first-year distance learners make this transition from an oral-based educational system are less than ideal, in that most students are employed, have limited university preparation, and may even have to change their conceptions of success and failure. OEF students can and do adjust to a system in which they rely primarily on their internal motivation. Not only are they motivated to pursue university degrees to improve their status and monetary situations, but they also use their abilities to memorize information to pass their examinations. They demonstrate their resourcefulness in adapting to the distance education system by making productive use of their free time and taking extra courses, if necessary, to compensate for their lack of preparation. Additionally, students use the study strategies suggested in their text books. Because the interaction of the personal, cultural, and educational contexts is different for each student, this interaction influences in differing ways the students' attributions for success and failure.

Implications for future research. This paper has outlined underlying structures of three contextual influences on distance learners' attributions for success and failure. Future research,

either qualitative or more empirically-based, should identify other pertinent cultural factors that are likely to influence achievement needs of distance learners, such as child-rearing practices that may emphasize authoritarianism or cooperation. Studies should also document changes occurring over time, such as an assessment of the assimilation of the OEF graduates into society. Finally, cross-cultural research in the area of achievement motivation should identify ethnic and socio-economic status differences in distance learners' attributions for success and failure.

This research provides baseline data upon which future research can be conducted about the motivation of OEF students. The results of this study may assist planners in designing instructional and delivery systems that are relevant to the needs of the changing profile of its students, particularly to new students in transition from face-to-face education. The research also demonstrates the use of qualitative research method in describing the bases of distance learners' conceptions of motivation. Finally, the study suggests that what is learned about the motivation of distance learners in Turkey may be relevant to distance education systems in other developing countries where similar educational and social values are upheld.

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Figure 1 TURKEY

Open Education Faculty Academic Advising Centers (1987-1988)

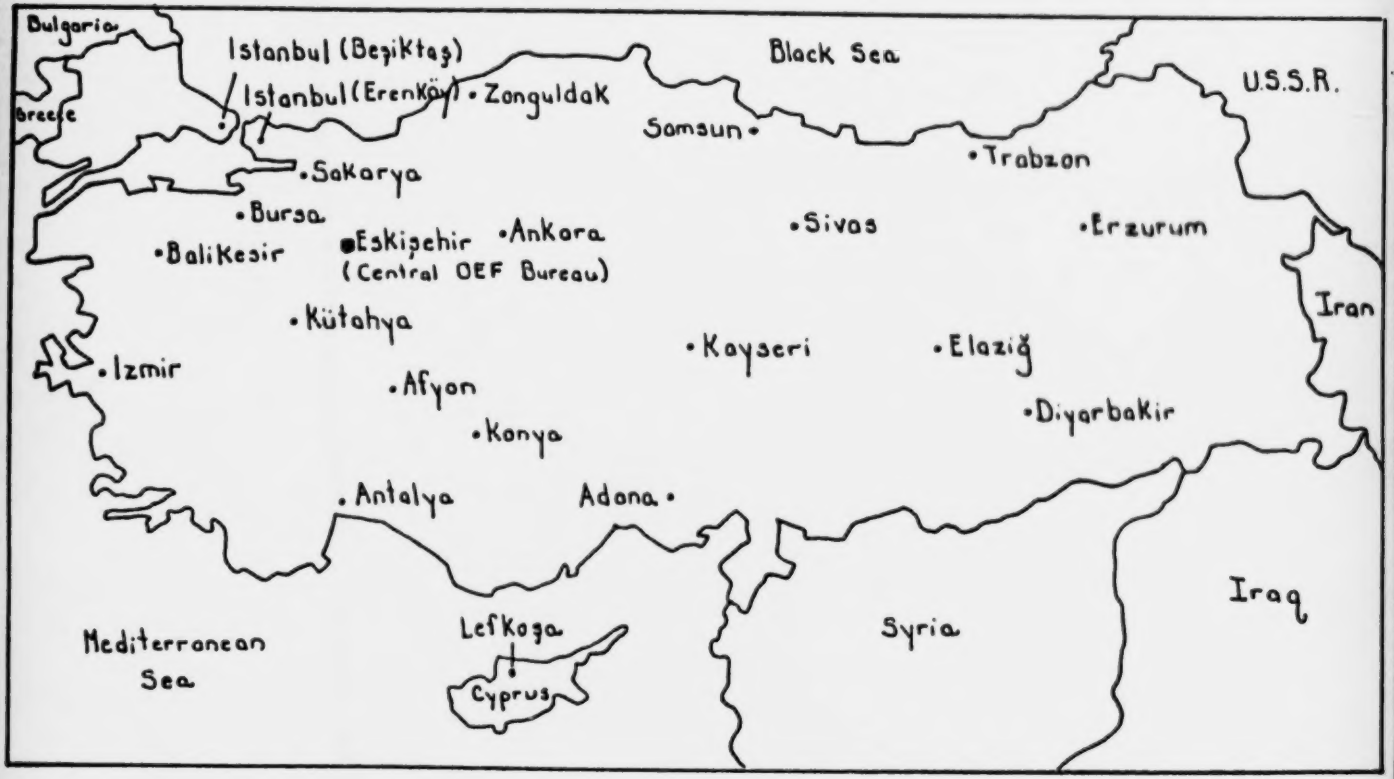

Figure 2: Reasons for participation in the OEF

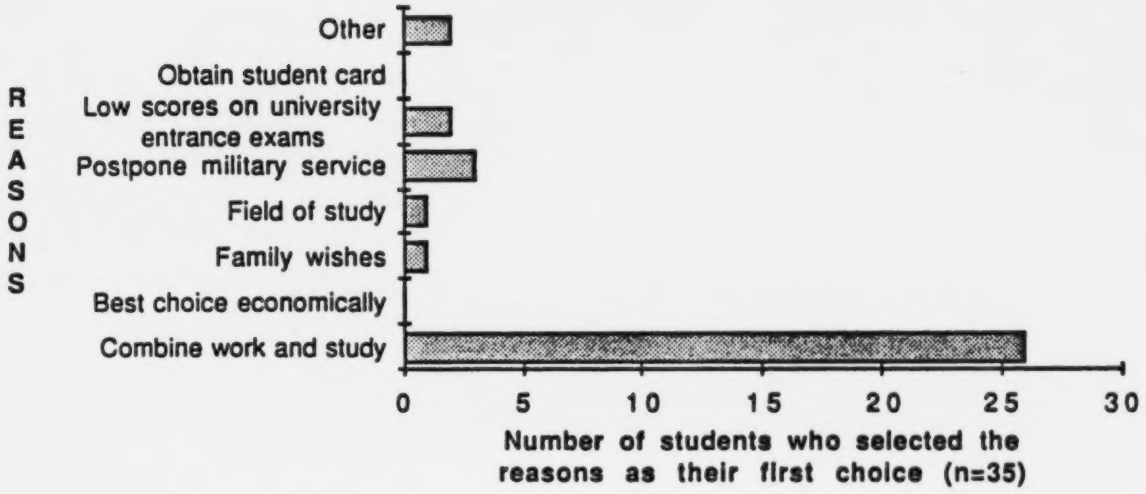

Figure 3: Attributions for unexpected success or failure on midterm examinations

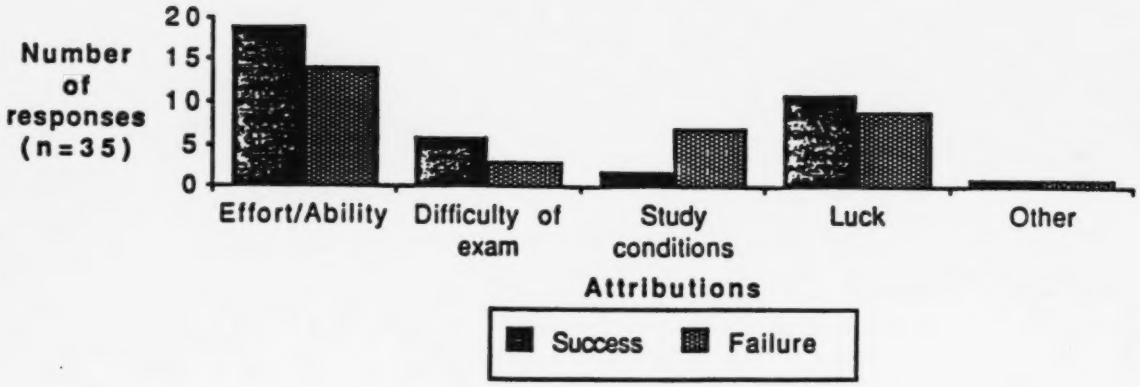

Figure 4: Incidence of reported attendance at the OEF Academic Advising Center

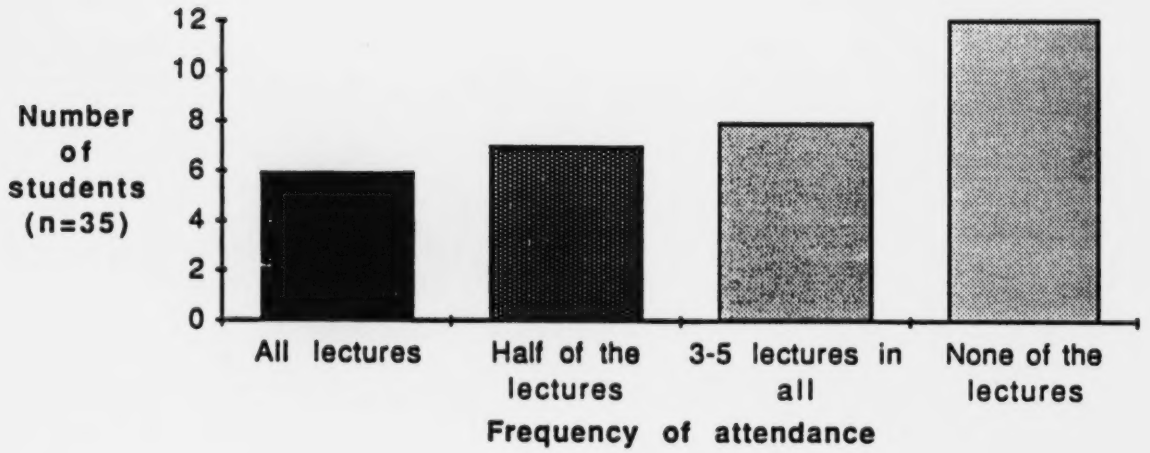

Figure 5: Incidence of reported viewing of OEF lessons